

A HISTORY OF THE MICCOSUKEE INDIANS

THE MICCOSUKEE TRIBE OF INDIANS OF FLORIDA

On December 17, 1961 the Tribal Council of the Miccosukee Indians adopted its present Constitution and Bylaws. The following month, on January 11, 1962, the government of the United States accepted this document, and thus officially recognized the Tribe in accordance with stipulations of its own "Indian Reorganization Act" of 1934. The following pages outline events of the Tribe's history before and after 1962.

WHO ARE THE MICCOSUKEES?

The Miccosukees belonged to the Creek Confederacy. They share many experiences with the Seminoles. In fact, the Miccosukee and Florida Seminole culture include most of the same beliefs and practices. The language spoken by the Miccosukees is also spoken by over half of the modern Seminole Tribe. This language is called Mikasuki.

In spite of all these similarities and connections between Miccosukees and the Creek Confederacy on the one hand or Seminoles on the other, the Miccosukees do have their own history.

BEFORE 1700

Legends of the Miccosukee give interesting explanations of their origins. One reports a people dropping from heaven into a lake and swimming ashore to build a town. Other legends refer to migrations, with stream crossing and animals the people had not known previously. Explanations of the Soul's wanderings during the night refer to old towns "in the north" inhabited now only by ghosts.

No early written records clarify the picture. Descriptions of the explorations of Hernando de Soto do not refer specifically to the Miccosukees. His path would have skirted the area where the Miccosukees most probably had their permanent settlements. But lands he saw were familiar to Miccosukee hunters. Settlements he saw were probably Timucuan, Apalachee and Muskogee Creek.

The Creek Confederacy was an association of clan villages along a creek or river. The towns shared legends, religious practices and festivals. They carried on trade and engaged in stick ball games with one another.

They spoke a common language, at least in the sense that an interpreter or two in each settlement could communicate with the other towns. This language of trade was Muskogee. Each town had its own language, too. In the Southwest of the "Creek" settlement area, people spoke Hitchiti, the language from which Mikasuki comes.

By the 1600's the inhabitants of the Creek Confederacy were the dominant group in the area now covered by Alabama, Georgia and the border areas of these states with Florida.

They lived by hunting and fishing and by growing crops, especially corn, around more permanent settlements. Corn and hunting figured heavily in the rituals which held the towns together in a single society. Corn, along with the herbs used in medicine, were miraculous gifts given to the people.

THE 1700's

The Miccosukees were familiar with parts of the Florida peninsula even before 1700. The Miccosukees tended to live by fishing and hunting and had wandered into central Florida even before the migrations of the 1700's. But in the early 1700's the Miccosukees started making permanent settlements further and further south. Various reasons account for this push southward.

In the 1600's the Spanish set up a line of missions and forts across northern Florida between St. Augustine and Pensacola. Miccosukees living near Lake Miccosukee moved away - some north, some east to the areas of the Muskogee-speaking Creeks.

Within less than a hundred years, the Timucua and Apalachee Indians living in the Spanish mission settlements were wiped out, largely by sickness. By the early 1700's, much of north Florida was uninhabited.

Sometime between 1715 and 1730, the main ancestors of the Miccosukees were back in the area of the Florida Panhandle, some settling in the Apalachee Bay region, some along the Chattahoochee and Apalachicola Rivers.

Around this time a group of Muskogee-speaking towns were also founded near present day Alachua; Mikasuki-speakers may have been in these towns too. Another new permanent settlement appears to have been made south of Gainesville around this time. It was made up predominantly of Miccosukees.

The predominant language in North Florida was now Mikasuki. The towns still maintained relationships with both the Creeks in Georgia and the Muskogee speakers in north central Florida.

THE DISRUPTIONS OF THE EARLY 1800'S

When white settlers started pushing west and south after the American Revolution, they came into conflict with the members of the Creek Confederacy. Some of the Creeks attacked a fort in 1813. Americans troops struck back and many Indians came into Florida. The famous war leader, Osceola, was probably with these new arrivals.

In 1812-1813, the Americans attacked the Muskogee towns around Alachua and many of the Indians fled further south. Meanwhile Miccosukees in the Panhandle were beginning to get caught up in the problems. Crooked slave traders started to raid the Indian villages to get back runaway slaves. When the Miccosukees fought back, Americans attacked across the border with 3,000 troops. The Miccosukees resisted for a while but eventually many left the area for good. No doubt they moved mainly to the settlements around Alachua, south of Gainesville and the Tampa Bay area.

In 1821, Spain sold Florida to the United States. Americans recognized rights of the Indians over much of the peninsula at this time, so they negotiated for land in the "Treaty of Moultrie Creek" (1823).

The treaty was no great benefit for the Miccosukees and their Creek and Seminole allies, for it amounted to a land grab. The Indian leaders who signed the treaty wanted peace. They agreed to get their clans to pull back to a reservation in central Florida. The Indians were to be allowed to live there in peace for twenty years.

In 1829-1830, agitation by new American settlers led the United States to dictate that all the Indians in the southeast had to move out west.

By 1835, the Miccosukee and Seminole groups were forced into a war known as the Second Seminole War. Events of this war are treated at length in many books, so it is not necessary to go into the full story here. Many Miccosukees were deported or killed as a result of the war, which lasted until 1842.

Finally, some more of the remaining Miccosukees and Seminoles died or sent west as a result of the Third Seminole War (1855-1858). The rest hid out in the vast Everglades and in the Big Cypress Swamp. They were able to escape the soldiers only by staying in small, almost family sized groups capable of picking up their camps quickly and of moving further back into the swamp.

Only about 150 to 200 Indians, mostly Mikasuki speakers, still lived in Florida by 1860 (around 1800 there had been probably 6,000 or more). The Indians' association of towns was broken up. They lived mostly in temporary camps. But their culture remained strong enough to absorb new elements.

Hunting and fishing still provided the staples of the people's diet. Corn was hard to grow when they were on the move but little patches were planted far away from civilization. More and more the people had to live off the land, harvesting the native fruits of the hammocks and the koontie and cabbage palm hearts of higher ground.

The rituals still were held far away from the towns or the forts of the soldiers; but less frequently and on a much smaller scale. The sacred bundles of medicine were kept from year to year by the medicine men. Somehow, against all odds, the people were able to hold on and survive.

THE PEOPLE COME OUT OF HIDING

In the middle of the second half of the century the scattered bands of people began coming back into more permanent settlements and venturing out to the trading places along the coasts.

Beginning in the 1870's identifiable communities began to form. The Mikasuki-speakers who had fled to the far reaches of the Everglades began to come back together in three spots, perhaps at first only for the yearly festivals like the Green Corn Dance. One spot was between the northern edge of land to the east of the watery prairies of the Everglades. Pine Island (near Fort Lauderdale) and the Miami River were important centers in this region. The third center formed at the Southern end of the Everglades in the Ten Thousand Islands area. This community maintained connections with the Big Cypress group and a canoe route ran between the two sites. Miccosukees settled in the neighborhood of the Calusa mounds near Chokoloskee as early as the 1880's, maybe even earlier.

It was a good time for Miccosukees. Life was still a struggle, but there were plenty of hammocks or dry fields which could be burnt off for growing corn, cane and pumpkins. The hunting was good and there was a surplus of alligator skins, deer hides and feathers for the people in the towns who wanted to exchange cloth, metal tools, guns and ammunition, salt and coffee.

NEW DISLOCATIONS AND THE NEED TO ADAPT

The period from the early 1920's until the middle of the Twentieth Century marks a difficult time for the Miccosukees. Their ability to adapt without being absorbed was tested to its utmost.

In 1906 and 1913, canals were cut to drain the northern and eastern Everglades for agriculture. Other canals dug in the 20's and 30's drained the wet lands even more, reducing the fish and game populations drastically.

The 20's also brought the first of the real estate booms that changed Miami and Fort Lauderdale almost overnight from small coastal towns into a single, expanding metropolis. The building boom forced the Indians off their camp sites on Pine Island and along the Miami River. Some moved onto the small reservation at Dania (now Hollywood), but others moved back west into the glades or into commercial "villages" in Miami itself.

From 1926 to 1928, another "improvement" was being added which changed the Miccosukees' lives. It was the new road, the Tamiami Trail (Route 41), which connects Tampa and Naples in the west with Miami in the east. Many Indians helped make this road, sticking to the difficult job when other workers couldn't take it and quit.

At first the new road was not a bad thing, since it made traveling to the coast much easier. As a result, people began to move south and north out of the glades to set up camps along the highway. By the mid-thirties and early forties a new "community" had been formed. It was sometimes referred to as the "Trail Indians".

But the road also brought further changes to the natural surroundings. It cut off the flow of the Everglades "river of grass" to the southwest, so that the areas south of the road were increasingly affected by the seasonal droughts. Also, the road opened up the interior to non-Indian hunters and fisherman. The game became harder and harder for the Miccosukees to find. But worst of all, the road was built right through the heart of Indian country. The Miccosukees were not yet organized according to the "rules" of the United States, and whatever resistance they had to the use of their lands by non-Indians was easy to overlook by the U.S. Government.

When the U.S. Department of Interior set up Everglades National Park (1934-1947), nature lovers throughout the United States proclaimed it a great victory for conservation. For the Miccosukees, it was something else, because a major portion of their ancestral land was simply declared the possession of the Federal Government.

From an isolated community that was nearly self-sufficient, the Miccosukee Indians found themselves thrust into the rush of the twentieth century. They now experienced a need for more money, education, and all that goes with the modern way of life. The lands that were once theirs to roam and hunt were not being developed, "posted", and eliminated from their use. Their leaders could see the need to seek assistance from outside sources to protect themselves for the future.

INCORPORATION, 1962

After years of distrust and resistance to attempts by the Federal and State governments to help them, the Miccosukees could see now that everything would be taken from them unless they could present their case in a way the U.S. Government and its courts could understand.

On January 11, 1962, the Miccosukee Constitution was approved by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the Tribe was officially organized as the "Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida". This political structure was different from traditional leadership. It was agreed to in order to deal with the United States and other government structures.

Membership in the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida is open to Indians of at least one half Miccosukee or Seminole Indian blood and who are not enrolled members of any other Tribe of Indians. At the present time there are approximately four hundred fifty (450) enrolled Miccosukee Indians. About 200 non-enrolled Indians, many belonging to members' families, also live along the Tamiami Trail and may participate in Tribal programs.

According to their new constitution, the governing body is the Miccosukee General Council. The officers of the General Council are Chairman, Assistant Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, and Lawmaker. They also act as the Business Council. The responsibility of the General Council is for matters relating to membership, Tribal Government, law and order, education, welfare, recreation, and fiscal disbursement. The Business Council looks after the development and management of the resources of the Tribe and manages its day-to-day business. The state and the counties exercise criminal jurisdiction over Indians in Florida, but only according to precedents established in the history of Indians and law in the U.S.

Until 1962, most Miccosukee children did not attend school. The first school opened on December 19, 1962 with an enrollment of nineteen (19) students. September 1965, the BIA completed the construction of a modern two-room school with kitchen and cafeteria facilities. A community building with a gymnasium was also built at this time.

In December 1964, the Tribe opened a large, modern restaurant approximately forty (40) miles west of Miami. The building is just north of the Shark Valley entrance to Everglades National Park. Just west of the restaurant the Tribe set a modern, fully equipped service station and a small grocery store. These, together with the restaurant, were the first Tribal enterprises.

In June, 1966 the Tribe received a grant for a Community Action Program from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

In 1967 the OEO further funded a local Head Start Program. With an all-Miccosukee staff, its enrollment climbed to an average 25 children a year.

In 1968, an outpatient clinic was first set up at the Miccosukee compound.

To help people cope with all the changes, an adult education program was begun. Studies were started not only of reading, writing and arithmetic, but also such signs of modern civilization as Social Security, income tax, drivers' license exams and insurance. The change in economy also made necessary instruction in health, nutrition, modern housekeeping, and in new employability skills like shorthand, typing and accounting.

But even as they absorbed new things, the Miccosukees also clung to the old. The one thing that had been the source of their solidarity from the beginning, their festivals, again provided the foundation of unity and strength. The Green Corn Dance was always held, usually in June. This is the time when the Tribe withdraws

itself into an isolated spot in the Everglades to celebrate their collective life, express their spirit as a people, renew what it means to be Indian, and restore their souls.

THE TAKEOVER

With the incorporation and recognition of the Miccosukees as a distinct Tribe, administration of health, education and welfare problems came under control of the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the U.S. Department of the Interior. But the Miccosukees were not completely satisfied with this arrangement. For a long time, the Miccosukee Agency was not even located at the same place as the Indians. Instead, it was some fifty miles away in Homestead.

In the early 1970's the Tribe entered into negotiations with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to change this situation. The negotiations ended with the Tribe's taking over the administration of all services, including health, education and welfare, which the BIA was obligated to provide by federal law. On May 4, 1971 officers of the Miccosukee Corporation, acting for the Miccosukee Tribe, signed a contract with the BIA authorizing the corporation to operate all programs and services formerly provided and administered by the BIA.

The Tribe's intent in negotiating the contract was clear. It wished to determine its own fate and gradually to develop complete self-sufficiency. Three initial phases of development gradually became clearer:

- Phase I - Negotiation of Contract: Take over control, hire staff, develop programs locally;
- Phase II - Develop a Base: Educate for self-determination, develop sources of personal income for Tribal members;
- Phase III- Attain Economic Self-Sufficiency: Develop Tribal enterprises to assure capital to maintain and improve programs.

The Tribe is nearing the end of Phase II in these development plans. It has demonstrated its ability to run its own affairs. Since the first contract, it has attracted grants and awards from many federal and state agencies and several private foundations.

A splendid clinic building now brings up-to-date medical and dental services to all. Family housing is being improved and added to every several years.

A large Tribal Office building, an even larger community building, a library, police station, Indian Action office building, high school and recreation building are further evidence of the rapid growth and expansion at the Tribal complex since the takeover. A vocational education garage is scheduled for completion in 1979.

Tribal enterprises have gradually materialized. Others remain in the planning stages. The tourist center, restaurant and service station provide employment to Tribal members, service to visitors and some income to the Tribe. Feasibility studies for future business and industrial ventures have been undertaken and plans for space and manpower development made.

Government services in health, education, law enforcement, social welfare and employment and recreation are now standard in the community.

FUTURE PLANS

The surge forward of the last seven to eight years has raised levels of the personal income of Tribal members. A new economy is emerging.

Enterprises planned or being investigated include: an aqua-culture project, additional tourism enterprises for Tamiami Trail and for the I-75 extension which will go through Tribal lands along the right-of-way of Alligator Alley (Route 84) and agricultural development is also being planned.

A tribal court system is in the final stages with implementation expected during 1979.

Tribal leadership realizes that much remains to be done, especially so that the Miccosukees can continue to be themselves in a changing world. A key to this cultural survival is in the values and underlying philosophy of the traditional life-way. But the old values, the heritage, will not stay alive unless they are constantly renewed and entered into wholeheartedly and creatively by the young generations. For this reason, the Tribe sees a need to develop Miccosukee culture studies at a higher level through a secondary curriculum and expansive studies at the college level.

One aspect of the attempt to renew and revitalize the culture can be seen in the development of an annual art festival. The first one was held during Christmas week, 1975.

But a key to the whole question of survival remains the land - what rights do the Miccosukees have?

Tribal attention has always been focused on this issue. When they incorporated early in the 1960's, Miccosukees did so to lay claim to land which was theirs by prior occupation. They wanted the land, not monies for its sale.

To be sure, in view of the destruction of their traditional economy through changes to the ecology of South Florida, the Tribe has not refused governmental grants. But the Miccosukees intend eventually to be independent of external funding, if enough capital can be generated to develop industries which create their own income.

But the Tribe must still have its legitimate claims to the land recognized. With the land and the financial wherewithal to develop it according to Indian values, the Miccosukees hope to demonstrate to non-Indians how man can remain in touch with nature and still humanize his environment.

The path traveled by the Miccosukees through 20 years of history discloses a people intent on finding its own way, a people that possesses the cultural resources and flexibility, as well as the personal sense of independence and determination to continue to be self-sufficient.

The Miccosukee way is reflected in its yellow, red, black and white flag, colors which stand for the circle of east, north, west and south. Miccosukees view the whole universe spinning slowly in a circle like the logs of their ceremonial fire. What was, will be and will cease to be again. But the circle of life now has become a wheel and Miccosukees are on the move.